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How TripAdvisor hunted a robocaller that made 100 million calls to random people

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TripAdvisor helps people find and rate hospitality. It also helps fight against robocalls. Source: Reuters

The war on robocalls has not been going well—as you probably know. Last week, however, the good guys chalked up a win: The FCC dropped a [\\$120 million fine](#) on a robocall spammer from Florida, Adrian Abramovich, who had made 96 million robocalls in the three-month period the agency investigated him.

To put this into perspective, that's 12 calls *per second*.

However, FCC Commissioner Mignon L. Clyburn said this is "sadly" just "a fraction of the approximately 2.6 billion robocalls" made just during the month of May.

The Commission's coup wasn't just their doing. The agency slammed a perfectly-tossed alley-oop by a frustrated company with little time and resources on its hands—TripAdvisor.

It all started in 2015, when TripAdvisor (TRIP) began to get calls from angry users demanding that they stop robocalling them and offering them “exclusive” deals on vacations. “We were like, ‘what are you talking about?’” said Brian Hoyt, a TripAdvisor spokesperson.

Here is an example of one of the messages, cited in the FCC’s formal complaint: “I just received an unsolicited robocall to my personal phone number that is on a do not call list. That call stated that it was on behalf of trip advisors trying to sell me something. If I ever get a call like that again, I will contact the FCC and I will open the gates of hell on TripAdvisor.”

After double-checking to make sure TripAdvisor didn’t have a telemarketing service, the company decided to investigate.

TripAdvisor has its own FBI—and it’s not afraid to use it

Unlike most companies, TripAdvisor has a robust investigation arm filled with ex-law enforcement and military experts that work to fight fraud. As a company that reviews businesses, it’s an extremely rich target for manipulation by companies that want to boost their own profiles or damage competitors, and this “content integrity” team works to make sure the reviews are honest. “We asked the content integrity team—can you take this on as a side project?” said Hoyt.

That same year, TripAdvisor’s investigators figured it out using methods they understandably did not want to disclose to Yahoo Finance, tracking through Mexican-based call centers and websites linked to former senior executives of a Mexican hotel chain, Sunset World Group. “We actually identified who this source of the calls were from a tech standpoint,” said Hoyt. “There were all these offshore clients who subscribed to a tech provider in Miami, run by this guy Adrian Abramovich. He possessed this tech to enable neighborhood spoofing.”

Robocalling—getting a computer to make a call—isn't hard. In fact, it's incredibly easy to automate, which is why it's such a pervasive problem. But Abramovich's evil genius was getting the caller ID to display a number that was similar to your own so you'd pick up. This is called "neighborhood spoofing."

"It's your area code, maybe first three numbers of your phone number. You have a high propensity to pick up those calls," said Hoyt. "Maybe it's my kid's school. You pick up and you hear a message from 'TripAdvisor.'" Using this illegal technology, Abramovich's "marketing service" enabled other companies to reach potential customers—or marks—with robocalls.

"He goes out and creates short-lived companies that all effectively do the same thing: Robocall to facilitate long list of clients, which happen to be offshore scammers who tap into his tech," said Hoyt. Two of the banners Abramovich worked under were "Marketing Strategy Leaders, Inc." and "Marketing Leaders, Inc."

TripAdvisor calls the FCC

With a solid dossier on Abramovich in its possession, TripAdvisor passed it to the FCC, which confirmed the company's findings by subpoenaing three months of call records. In that time, 96,758,223 calls were made and the Commission reviewed 80,000. Every call had a spoofed caller ID with the first six digits of the dialed number, the FCC complaint read. The Commission called 105 of these recipients and confirmed the calls were unwanted spam.

"Someone at FCC said 'you got us to third base and we are we able to walk home on this one,'" said Hoyt, who effusively described the agency's professionalism. The FCC also managed to identify Abramovich using tips from medical pager company Spök, whose text-only pager network had the potential to be battered by incessant robocall traffic, which would be a serious public safety concern.

For a company whose entire purpose is to be a source of quality control for trips, hotels, restaurants and more, it's a natural fit for TripAdvisor to attack scams and consumer nuisance. "We had the resources and experience," said Hoyt. But TripAdvisor wasn't the only company that Abramovich's calls impersonated. Expedia (EXPE), Hilton (HLT), Marriott (MAR) and other travel companies' names were in the mix. Until it's fixed, scamming robocalls will be a threat to all businesses.

TripAdvisor's synergy with the FCC does provide a private-public partnership model for dealing with enforcement of these issues, which is often frustratingly difficult and less effective than going after root causes, which is [what phone companies are doing](#).

"This person's one of many; it won't stop robocalls," said Hoyt. "But it's a good shot across the bow that this isn't a good long-term business model."

Ethan Wolff-Mann is a writer at Yahoo Finance focusing on consumer issues, tech, and personal finance. Follow him on Twitter @ewolffmann. Got a tip? Send it to tips@yahoo-inc.com.

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